

CHILD SUPPORT  
AND  
*Child Welfare*

Enhancing Agency  
Collaboration  
and  
Case Processing

September 2008

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Prepared under a grant from the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (Grant Number 90FI0073). The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement.

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## **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Karen Anthony of the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement for help with this project and all of the participants at 2006 and 2007 conferences on Child Welfare and Child Support.

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## Introduction

What child support agencies share in common with child welfare agencies is children. Not simply children in the abstract, but often the very same children from the very same families — very often, poor families.

When child support and child welfare operate entirely independently, the end result can be poorer outcomes for families. Vital information known to one agency may be missing at another. Absent parents who might be a resource for a child may not be located. Parents with children in foster care may receive child support in error and face the prospect of making repayments. Or, child support may never be established even though it would help the family to reunify and be self-sufficient.

Every community faces some of the same problems in handling multiple-agency families, although, of course, every community faces unique challenges and opportunities as well. As part of the demonstration project “Child Support and Child Welfare: Enhancing Agency Collaboration and Case Processing,” the Center for Policy Research (CPR) brought together representatives of child support and child welfare agencies in selected, interested jurisdictions from eight states to work together to identify areas of mutual concern, ways to improve case processing and management, and generally to enhance interagency communication and understanding. CPR convened conferences in July 2006 and July 2007, each with representatives of four of the following locations:

- Camden County, New Jersey;
- Clackamas County, Oregon;
- Davidson County, Tennessee;
- Hampden and Worcester counties, Massachusetts;
- Hennepin County, Minnesota;
- Los Angeles County, California;
- Milwaukee County, Wisconsin; and
- Oklahoma County, Oklahoma.

Selected demographic information about the participating locations is found in Appendix A. They ranged in size with the smallest participating jurisdictions having populations of approximately 400,000 (Clackamas County, Oregon; Camden County, New Jersey; and Hampden County, Massachusetts) to Los Angeles County, which had a population of 9.6 million in 2000. They also had varied racial/ethnic profiles, linguistic characteristics, and poverty statuses. For example, the proportion of female-headed households with children under 18 that had incomes at or below poverty level ranged from 22.9 percent in Hennepin County, Minnesota, to approximately 50 percent in Oklahoma County, Oklahoma, and Hampden County, Massachusetts.

Information about the child welfare and child support status of these jurisdictions appears in Appendix B. It shows that the number of children in placement ranged from a low of 414 in Clackamas County, Oregon, to a high of 47,443 in Los Angeles, California, with most participating jurisdictions having about 1,000 to 3,000

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children in care. There was also considerable variation in the number of open child support cases, which ranged from 5,030 in Clackamas County, Oregon, to 470,595 in Los Angeles.

This report will:

- Examine the many ways in which cases come to be served by both child support and child welfare;
- Highlight some of the problems that can occur when each agency operates without knowledge of the overlap in cases;
- Discuss some of the obstacles that child support and child welfare agencies face in their efforts to collaborate in serving shared cases;
- Describe the conferences held to facilitate interagency communication and collaboration;
- Showcase actions taken in eight states as a result of the conferences to improve the handling of cases with multiple agency involvement; and
- Summarize key lessons learned.

The hope is that this information will help other jurisdictions to better understand the need for interagency collaboration and assist them as they consider what types of agency changes are needed to enhance communication and cooperation.

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## **Why Child Support and Child Welfare Must Collaborate**

The most recent data available indicate that slightly more than half a million children in the United States are living in foster care at any given point in time.<sup>i</sup> In other words, approximately 7.2 children per 1,000 are in foster care.

Through the Title IV-E Program, the federal government reimburses states for a portion of their annual expenditures on foster care. For many years, the cost of foster care rose at a far greater rate than did total out-of-home placements. For example, between 1986 and 1996, caseloads rose approximately 51 percent,<sup>ii</sup> while federal reimbursements for foster care rose 450 percent.<sup>iii</sup>

In FY2005, the average monthly foster care maintenance payment was \$648 per child, or over \$7,000 per year per child.<sup>iv</sup> This results in federal expenditures of about \$5 billion annually.

The states also contribute to the cost of out-of-home care. The federal government uses a complex system to determine whether a child is eligible for reimbursement. The formula grows out of the historic roots of the IV-E program, which was designed to offset the costs of removing children who received welfare payments from homes that were deemed “unfit” by state. The formula requires states to determine if a child would have been eligible for Aid to Families for Dependent Children (AFDC) as it existed in the state on July 16, 1996. Foster care for non-eligible children must be paid through other funds, including state funds.

### **Child Support in Foster Care Cases**

To help reimburse their costs in providing foster care, most states do the following:

- Redirect any child support being collected on behalf of the child to the state during the time the child is in foster care; and
- Establish a child support order against both parents, with payment due to the state during the duration of foster care placement.

However, the need for collaboration and cooperation between the child welfare and child support agencies in a community goes beyond the role of the child support agency in helping to recover costs the state incurs in providing care.

**Existing Child Support Cases.** Some children who enter foster care already have an active child support case. In these cases, it is important for the child support and child welfare agency to communicate for several reasons. Without coordinated efforts, the child support agency may continue to collect and distribute child support dollars either to the parent from whom the child was removed or to the IV-A agency (in families receiving TANF).

The incorrect disbursement of child support, if identified, will require repayment to the IV-E agency. If the error is caught after the child returns home (and national statistics show that about half of the children in foster care leave the system to return home<sup>v</sup>), the custodial parent may be faced with repaying child support just as the child returns home and costs increase.

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Without coordination between child welfare and child support, improper child support may continue to be distributed to the IV-E system after the child leaves care. This improper disbursement means that the custodial parent will have less than the proper amount of financial resources to help with the child's transition back home.

Finally, without coordination, cases referred to child support by the IV-E agency may be mistakenly assumed to be new cases in need of an order, rather than an existing case in need of changes in disbursement. This can create a problem when the child support agency opens another case on an existing family. Child support agencies face performance measures that determine state economic penalties and incentives. Agencies that have multiple open cases for the same noncustodial parent will increase their caseload artificially and decrease their efficiency.

**New Referrals to Child Support for Orders.** Cases without an existing child support order may be sent to have an order established against a parent who was not living with the child at the time of the foster care removal. While this step will help to offset the costs to the IV-E agency for foster care, it will also have potential important consequences after reunification.

Families in the child welfare system are disproportionately poor and female-headed single-parent homes. Data on the home from which children were removed is often missing in the data collected and reported by the states. However, for 23 states with relatively complete data, the percentage of children removed from single-parent homes ranged from 37 percent in Oregon to 88 percent in Maryland.<sup>vi</sup>

The most recent National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect<sup>vii</sup> concluded that children in single parent homes were significantly more likely to be victims of abuse or neglect. The study also found that compared to children in families earning at least \$30,000 per year, those from households earning less than \$15,000 were more than 20 times as likely to suffer some form of child maltreatment.

For poor, single-parent families, child support can be an important source of income. Research finds that among custodial mothers who receive child support, it accounts for 16 or 17 percent of their total incomes.<sup>viii</sup> Having additional economic resources when the child is returned home can only help strengthen the family.

**Referrals for Paternity and Locate.** Child support can also help in child welfare cases by finding fathers and establishing paternity. As noted above, single-parent homes, and specifically households headed by single mothers, are common in the child welfare caseload. A number of studies looking at fathers in the child welfare system conclude that historically the system has generally overlooked fathers. Focus groups with caseworkers found many felt that involving fathers simply complicated the case.<sup>ix</sup> Other studies found that locating fathers was perceived as time-consuming<sup>x</sup> and caseworkers and supervisors often were seen as reluctant to involve fathers against the wishes of mothers.<sup>xi</sup>

Greater emphasis is now placed on fathers in the child welfare system. One factor contributing to this change is the time limit imposed by legislation for establishing a permanent home for children in foster care. In past generations, children often remained in foster care indefinitely. Judges and caseworkers were often unwilling to commit to returning the child the home from which she or he was removed, but equally reluctant to terminate parental rights and free the child for adoption. Children often spent most of their lives in care.

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Beginning in 1980, legislation began mandating timely decision making. Most recently, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) requires (with some exceptions) permanency decisions within 12 months.

Legal requirements to find permanent homes for children or free them for adoption make it imperative that fathers be located. If a father is a potential permanent placement for a child, the worker needs to begin working with him. If he is not a permanency option, he must be located so his parental rights can be terminated. Ignoring the father can result in his emergence into the case just as the 12-month, decision-making deadline draws near.

Recognizing the importance of locating fathers, the ASFA granted permission to access, and encouraged, child welfare to use, the primary location tools of the child support agency: the state and federal parent locator services (SPLS and FPLS, respectively).

The SPLS and FPLS allow child support agencies to search for absent parents in a variety of databases, including the National Directory of New Hires, which is a repository of data related to employment, unemployment, and wages; the Federal Case Registry, which contains information on child support cases; as well as data maintained by the Internal Revenue Service, the Social Security Administration, the Departments of Defense and Veterans' Affairs, the Federal Bureau of Information, and the National Security Administration.

While most child welfare agencies cannot directly access the FPLS, child support can search this database for child welfare and report back on data that may allow the caseworker to find a noncustodial parent. A pilot project in South Carolina found that such searches are successful at locating 75 percent of the cases referred by child welfare, and most are located within a month of the referral.<sup>xii</sup>

A second change in casework that has led to increased attention to fathers in child welfare cases is the growth of kinship care. Federal law, and case work best practice, finds that children who are removed from their homes should be placed in the least restrictive — most home-like — setting safely possible.

The emphasis on placement with relatives has increased the need to identify all possible family members who may serve, either temporarily or permanently, as a placement resource for a child. This means that locating noncustodial parents and their relatives is essential.

A third change in casework, encouraged by the ASFA, which also argues for father involvement, is that of concurrent planning. Best practice calls for child welfare workers to simultaneously prepare for more than a single outcome in a case. Without concurrent planning, the worker assumes that the case goal of reunification will be achieved, and essentially starts over when it is not. The worker doing concurrent planning may simultaneously work towards reunification, while preparing for long-term care with a relative or termination of parental rights and adoption.

The real-world costs of child support and child welfare failing to work together on location efforts was graphically demonstrated when a Los Angeles teenager sued the County for keeping her in foster care for 10 years without notifying her biological father, who continued to pay child support without realizing his daughter was no longer with her mother.<sup>xiii</sup>

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Child welfare agencies can also benefit greatly from the paternity establishment expertise of child support agencies. It is not enough to locate a father. His legal relationship to the child must be established before further action (whether it be placement, visitation, services, or a termination of rights) is possible. For never-married parents, paternity may be established voluntarily through parental acknowledgment or it may be done by genetic testing.

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## **Obstacles to Collaboration**

Although there are compelling reasons to collaborate, public agencies can expect to encounter numerous obstacles as they attempt to join forces.

### **Different Performance Measures and Missions**

Child support and child welfare programs have very different missions, and their performance is measured in very different ways.

Since 1975, the federal government has paid incentives to state child support enforcement programs to encourage improved child support collections through efficient establishment and enforcement techniques. These incentive payments are a key source of funding for state programs. The method for calculating payments changed with the adoption of the Child Support Performance and Incentive Act (CSPIA) in 1998. This system was developed from recommendations by an Incentive Funding Workgroup composed of state and federal partners. Key elements of the performance-based incentive system include:

- Linking incentive payments to performance in five measured areas: paternity establishment, order establishment, collections on current support due, cases paying toward arrears, and cost-effectiveness;
- Data must be reliable and complete, as determined by annual data reliability audits;
- Incentives are based on state collections and performance;
- States are paid from a capped incentive pool; and
- Incentives must be reinvested into state child support programs.

Child welfare agencies are subject to several federal performance reviews. The federal Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) focuses on:

- **Child Safety:** Children are, first and foremost, protected from abuse and neglect. Children are safely maintained at home whenever possible and appropriate.
- **Permanency:** Children have permanency and stability in their living situation. The continuity of family relationships/connections is preserved for children.
- **Child/Family Well-Being:** Families have enhanced capacity to provide for their children's needs. Children receive appropriate services to meet their education needs. Children receive adequate services to meet their physical and mental health needs.

The CFSR is a two-stage process comprised of a statewide assessment and an on-site review. The CFSR reports on whether the state is or is not in substantial conformity with respect to:

- Reoccurrence of maltreatment;
- Incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care;
- Foster care re-entry rate;

- Stability of foster care placements;
- Length of time to achieve reunification; and
- Length of time to achieve adoption.

States with data that do not meet the national standard in a CFSR are required to implement a program improvement plan (PIP) designed to improve performance on the data indicators.

The reviews of the Federal Title IV-E foster care program focus on whether a child meets the statutory eligibility requirements for the program. The review team is comprised of federal and state representatives who examine cases of children for information such as:

- A court order stating that the child welfare agency removed the child only when necessary;
- A court order stating that the agency provided reasonable efforts to preserve the family, if appropriate, and to achieve permanency for the child;
- A completed criminal background check on the foster parent; and
- Confirmation that the child met the income test for the program.

States receive a primary review and, when necessary, a secondary review. In the primary reviews, a sample of 80 foster care cases is examined to ensure that children for whom IV-E payments are being made meet the federal eligibility requirements. If five or more cases in the primary review do not meet the federal requirements, the state is determined not to be in substantial compliance. Regardless of the compliance determination, a disallowance in federal financial participation funds is assessed for all cases that do not meet federal requirements.

States determined to be in substantial compliance based on the primary review are reviewed at three-year intervals. States determined not to be in substantial compliance are required to develop and implement a PIP to correct the areas of noncompliance. Within a year after the PIP is completed, the ACF conducts a secondary review that assesses a sample of 150 cases. After the secondary review, if the state still is not in compliance, a disallowance is assessed on the basis of the state's total foster care population for the six-month review period. Regardless of the compliance determination, a disallowance in federal financial participation funds is assessed for all cases that do not meet federal requirements.

### **Automation Compatibility**

Within the last two decades, legislation has been enacted to either mandate or support the development of data information systems in both child support and child welfare. All states were required by the 1988 Family Support Act to develop a single, statewide automated child support system. Systems were to automate the following types of actions:

- Initiating cases for families receiving public assistance;
- Locating absent parents using searches of databases, including the FPLS;
- Tracking, monitoring, and reporting on efforts to establish paternity and support orders;

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- Processing case updates to keep the caseworker informed about due dates and activities;
  - Monitoring compliance with support orders and beginning enforcement actions, such as wage withholding or tax refund offset;
  - Billing cases, processing payments, and making disbursements; and
  - Maintaining information for accounting, reporting, and monitoring.

However, statewide automation of the child support system was a major undertaking, especially in large states, and one that was still in progress as late as 2008.

Federal support for statewide automated child welfare information systems (SACWIS) began in 1993 with Public Law 103-66, which provided states with the opportunity to obtain funding through the Title IV-E program to design and implement a SACWIS. A SACWIS is to be a comprehensive automated case management tool that supports social workers' foster care and adoptions assistance case management practice.

The lack of statewide automated systems for either the child support or child welfare programs has necessarily slowed communication and information sharing between the agencies. The sheer volume of cases makes case-by-case and worker-to-worker communication inefficient.

### **Agency Size and Complexity**

In some settings, important barriers to cross-agency communication and collaboration are the size and diversity of the agencies and their service populations. Consider, for example, the following statistics from a large county that participated in the project "Child Support and Child Welfare: Enhancing Agency Collaboration and Case Processing":

- Los Angeles County has an estimated population of approximately 10,331,939 spread over 4,752 square miles. As 2004, it was larger than 42 states. It includes 88 incorporated cities, as well as numerous unincorporated areas.
- The Los Angeles County Office of Child Support Enforcement is composed of six regional offices with approximately 1,700 workers. The agency serves nearly 471,000 open cases.<sup>xiv</sup>
- The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services provides child welfare services in 18 offices throughout the county. There are over 3,000 workers, 100 managers, and 540 supervisors. The county has close to 50,000 children in foster care, nearly 60 percent of whom are served with IV-E dollars.<sup>xv</sup>

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## **Convening Cross-Agency Conferences**

In September 2005, OCSE granted the Center for Policy Research (CPR) funds to improve collaboration between sister agencies in multiple jurisdictions. The project brought together representatives of child welfare and child support agencies in targeted jurisdictions from eight states to engage in planning and the development of plans to improve the handling of cases jointly held by both agencies. One two-day conference held in July 2006 brought together child welfare and child support representatives from:

- Camden County, New Jersey;
- Hennepin County, Minnesota;
- Los Angeles County, California; and
- Milwaukee County, Wisconsin.

A second two-day conference in July 2007 convened representatives of child welfare and child support from:

- Clackamas County, Oregon;
- Davidson County, Tennessee;
- Hampden and Worcester counties, Massachusetts; and
- Oklahoma County, Oklahoma.

Appendix C contains lists of attendees at the July 2006 and 2007 conferences.

The award to CPR was one of several measures that federal-level agencies for child welfare and child support had recently taken to improve collaboration and communication. For example, in 2006, the OCSE released a request for proposals soliciting projects to promote collaboration between IV-D and IV-E agencies. Collaboration was a theme of a series of regional meetings with child support, Medicaid, SCHIP, and child welfare held in 2005 and 2006 by the Administration for Children and Families. And in 2006, the OCSE and the Children's Bureau were engaged in preparing an Information Memorandum (IM) to guide state IV-D and IV-E agencies on referrals to child support, including the criteria of an appropriate referral and electronic exchanges between the automated systems maintained by the two agencies. A copy of the IM is presented in Appendix D.

### **Issues for the Conference**

Based on a series of planning calls with representatives of the participating child welfare and child support agencies, CPR developed conference agendas that incorporated the major concerns of participating jurisdictions. A copy of the agendas for the 2006 and 2007 conferences appears in Appendix E. They included the following topics:

**Paternity Establishment.** Participants were eager to discuss issues pertaining to the establishment of paternity in foster care cases. Ensuring that both child support and child welfare have an identified father with paternity established can be problematic. There may be simultaneous paternity actions in the

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dependency court and in child support, and paternity establishments are not always conveyed from one setting to another.

In addition, paternity orders established in juvenile court may lack documentation and fail to constitute legal paternity for child support purposes. Since birth certificates and voluntary paternity acknowledgement information is often filed separately, failure to consult both databases may lead workers to reach erroneous conclusions about paternity.

**Location.** Location presents a host of challenges for both agencies. Although child support agencies have information about fathers and paternal relatives that would be helpful for placement purposes, it is often legally difficult to share. Both agencies are confused about the information that they can share by law. Allowing child welfare workers direct access to the Federal Parent Locator Service (FPLS) would require congressional action. As a result, the state child support agency must process all requests to FPLS to locate a father for adoption and placement purposes.

Some states cannot process location requests without establishing a child support case. In these states, a request for location assistance by the child welfare agency has workload and performance implications since referrals require opening a child support case even if collections are unlikely.

**Staff Training.** Training was a recognized need by all conference participants. Child welfare workers frequently do not understand the role that child support can play in their cases and the location resources they can access to facilitate the identification of fathers and paternal relatives for placement purposes. Child support workers, on the other hand, have little understanding of the child welfare system and the key goals and pressures that workers face.

Workers in both agencies have little guidance on whom to contact in the opposite agency for assistance. Although several agencies had conducted some limited training activities at some point, none had developed a curriculum or a sustained training program. In addition, both child support and child welfare agencies experience high staff turnover, which necessitates ongoing training.

**Staffing Arrangements.** Conference participants wanted to talk about staffing arrangements that might enhance case coordination. Some states have special child support units that exclusively handle cases that involve state placement. In other jurisdictions, foster care cases are distributed among regular child support workers.

**Case Referral.** Child welfare cases are referred to child support using a variety of manual and automated techniques. While some jurisdictions have a fully automated interface whereby all child welfare cases that involve a paid placement are automatically referred to child support in an overnight batch process, others rely on a paper referral.

One advantage of the automated process is that cases are referred on a nightly basis and automatically matched with active cases in the child support system. To maximize the utility of child support information, and the possibility of identifying fathers for placement and termination purposes, child welfare workers have limited access to the child support system.

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Jurisdictions with less automated procedures struggle to process the paper referrals they receive from child welfare and to match them with existing cases in the child support system. They also struggle to identify the type of foster care cases that should be referred to child support. They want to avoid referring cases that open briefly and close quickly. They also want to avoid making referrals where reunification is a case goal and where the collection of child support might impede reunification. Indeed, to address these concerns and reduce the huge volume of foster care referrals that child support agencies in California were receiving, the state implemented a policy that requires child welfare workers to assess whether the child support referral would present a barrier to reunification and if establishment and enforcement of support is in the best interests of the child. It also required that workers document their determination before making a referral.

**Interagency Communication.** A final concern expressed by personnel in both agencies dealt with communication at later stages of case processing. Child support agencies need to learn about changes in custodial arrangements so that they distribute child support correctly. Child welfare agencies need to know when child support locates noncustodial parents, establishes an order, and collects support.

### **Conference Structure and Content**

Both conferences began with presentations designed to help them better understand the other agency. Child support workers heard about the steps involved in placing a child in foster care, the laws governing how quickly cases must be processed, the performance measures on which the child welfare agency is assessed, and the penalties for non-performance. Similarly, child welfare workers heard about the mission underlying the child support agency, the importance of child support to poor families, the enforcement actions that will occur if noncustodial parents fail to comply with child support orders, and the federal performance measures used to assess child support programs.

Presentations were made on the IV-E funding system, the Federal Parent Locator Service, and its potential role in helping to locate parents of children who enter foster care, and on growing efforts to involve fathers in child welfare cases.

Much of the conference involved full-group discussions of the topics chosen during the planning phone calls. In addition, sites with ongoing or completed initiatives related to the selected topics were asked to make informal presentations about their innovations and the resulting outcomes.

Binders were distributed to all conference participants. The binders provided overviews of the participating agencies and communities. They also contained written materials relevant to agency operations, special practices and procedures, and the topics of FPLS, fathers and child welfare, and other relevant topics. Summaries of the 2006 and 2007 conferences appear in Appendix F and Appendix G, respectively.

### **Creating Action Plans**

Over the course of the two-day conferences held in both 2006 and 2007, a number of site-specific breakout meetings were scheduled to allow the child support and child welfare representatives of each site to meet separately and develop their plans. During these breakout sessions, participants were asked to identify a few areas in which they felt improvements could be made in the child support-child welfare relationship, communication, and collaboration. On special data forms, participants were asked to record what issue they

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hoped to address, the problems they hope to correct, the steps to take, who would be responsible for the successful completion of the task, and task completion dates. Appendix H contains a copy of the Action Plan Form that sites used to record their goals, interim steps, target due dates, and responsible parties.

### **Follow-Up Calls**

Following the conferences, the Center for Policy Research held periodic “reunion calls” with the participating sites. These calls allowed the participants of either the 2006 or the 2007 conference to discuss with the other sites how work was progressing on their proposed action plans, barriers encountered, revisions made, and future plans.

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## Action Plans and Outcomes

### Nature of the Action Plans

Classifying the activities proposed by conference participants is necessarily rather arbitrary. Many activities spanned across several classifications. For example, creating agency liaisons might be a staffing initiative or a communication initiative. The following summary lists each major goal only a single time rather than reiterating goals in each category in which they might fall. Where relevant, we include examples of products developed by the participating jurisdictions.

**Training.** Six of the eight sites that took part in the conferences chose cross-agency training as a priority for future action. The action plans typically noted the need for an interdisciplinary committee to guide the development of training materials and to assist in planning training events. In addition, four of the six sites specifically noted the need to incorporate overviews of their partner agency into the training they provide to new workers. The proposed training generally included an introduction to the goals and mandates of the partner agency, the means by which the agency is evaluated, and the ways in which child welfare and child support cases intersect.

Appendix I contains copies of the slides developed by the Los Angeles Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and the Child Support Services Department to train social workers on the role of child support in child welfare cases, including the process of opening a case, establishing a court order, enforcing a court order, and closing a case. The training has been delivered to all current employees of DCFS.

**Referrals.** Two sites made work on the policies and practices that govern the referral of child welfare cases to the child support agency a central piece of their action plans. The New Jersey action plan called for an assessment of baseline referral activities in Camden County, the piloting of new referrals procedures, and the collection of qualitative and quantitative data on how well the new procedure works.

Los Angeles had begun work major revisions to the referral process prior to the conference, and incorporated further training and monitoring of the new policies into the site action plan. Specifically, the Los Angeles plan focused on training front-line staff on the role of child support and the referral criteria, implemented in February 2006, which require workers to determine whether a referral to child support is appropriate and in the best interests of a child, and to document their determination before making a referral. The plan called for forming a planning team drawn from representatives of targeted child support and child welfare offices to lead the implementation of the new referral criteria and the development of training for child welfare workers on child support and the new referral criteria. The plan further specified collecting baseline information on referral activity and the appropriateness of referrals for a sample of cases in offices targeted for training, and assessing post-training patterns of referral and appropriateness.

Appendix J provides materials on the California regulation requiring social workers to make a best interest determination for a child support referral, along with training slides on the new policy. To equip social workers to assess whether a referral to child support was in the best interests of a child while the child was in foster care, administrators of the two agencies launched a major drive to educate workers on the new policy. The training was meant to combat the fact that nearly all cases were being automatically referred to child

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support. Following the completion of the training program, the number of cases referred to child support by social workers at DCFS on a monthly basis dropped from approximately 900 to 374.

**Communication.** Although improved communication and interactions between child support and child welfare were implicit goals of most action plans, four sites made communication a focal point of the action plan. Los Angeles addressed interagency communication, in part, by identifying liaisons for child support and child welfare so that workers have a point person in each geographical area to contact with questions or problems. Oklahoma proposed to form a workgroup with representatives from child welfare, child support, and Family Support to exchange information about processes.

New Jersey proposed to expand the existing state-level workgroup with other relevant partners to review and revise policies and procedures pertaining to the flow of cases from child welfare to child support. In addition, New Jersey proposed to create a Camden County management group comprised of child support and child welfare representatives for Camden County pilot activities.

The action plan for Milwaukee County specified the creation and convening of a workgroup comprised of participants of the Planning Conference and other relevant individuals in child support and child welfare at the county and state levels including systems experts, trainers and business analysts.

Appendix K contains a copy of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services and the Department of Workforce Development. It provides for the release and access of information in both the Wisconsin Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information Systems (WISACWIS) and the Kids Information Data System (KIDS).

**Staffing.** Two of the participating sites proposed staffing changes in the action plans. Tennessee proposed to assign a child support worker to handle foster care cases and receive referral from children's services.

Oregon's statewide child support office proposed to divide cases within the office geographically, rather than by alphabet. This, along with a contact plan, would help Central Recovery Unit (CRU) workers to develop relationships with child welfare field workers. The state hoped that this would ensure that notifications would be given to child welfare workers when child support services were initiated, expedite paternity establishment, and aid in gathering information by sending child support representatives to court. In addition, at the time of the conference, the CRU did not serve foster care cases where a child support order was in place before placement and the action plan called for these cases to be included.

Appendix L contains information on the structure and operation of specialized units to handle foster care cases within the child support agency. It covers the State Recovery Central Unit in Oregon; the Parental Fees Unit within Hennepin County, Minnesota; and the Milwaukee County Children's Court Center in Wisconsin.

**Automation.** The action plans of several of the sites participating in the 2006 and 2007 conferences noted the need for changes in the automated system. Hennepin County proposed to explore the feasibility of improving information sharing between SACWIS and the child support system PRISM. Oklahoma also noted the need for better automated information sharing related to changes in paternity, custody, and placement, including the development of an alert "pop-up" to notify workers of changes.

Massachusetts proposed to incorporate child support referral into the new imaging/workflow document generation system currently under development. The Milwaukee County action plan called for a convening of personnel for the automated child support and child welfare system to examine the level of access accorded to various workers and changes in the systems, reevaluate the status of system identifiers to see if changes need to be made to improve the referral process, and to examine web-based systems that allow data sharing between diverse government agencies at state, local, and federal levels, such as Virginia’s SPIDeR and Utah’s eFind.

Appendix M contains information on Virginia’s Systems Partnering in a Demographic Repository (SPIDeR) and Utah’s eFind.

**Locate and Paternity Establishment.** Finally, several participating sites, including Minnesota and Massachusetts, incorporated into their action plans an assessment and expansion of the use of child support locate tools to allow child welfare workers to identify and locate absent parents and family members.

Appendix N contains information on Oregon’s procedure for processing Federal Parent Local Service requests for child welfare workers with legislation (Senate Bill 234) that makes the child welfare agency the obligee in foster care cases and allows the child support agency to routinely do paternity testing by judicial order.

**Progress on the Action Plans**

In April 2008, (nearly 12 and 24 months following the 2006 and 2007 conferences) site participants were asked to complete an online survey about their experiences and thoughts about the conference and their subsequent efforts to encourage interagency collaboration. A total of 28 individuals — 17 from child support agencies and 11 from child welfare agencies — completed the survey. This represented a 70 percent response rate, since only 40 of the 45 site participants were still employed by the participating agencies and could be contacted for survey purposes. As a part of this survey, respondents were asked to provide an update on the activities at their site since the conference.

Table 1 shows that 82 percent of the child welfare respondents and 94 percent of the child support respondents reported continued activity on the action plan following the conference.

**Table 1. Respondents Report of Progress on Their Action Plans Since the Conference**

	Child Welfare Respondents	Child Support Respondents
Child support and child welfare have continued discussions around the action plan		
No	18%	6%
Yes	82%	94%
	(11)	(17)

Because the survey was anonymous, it is not possible to look at reported progress on training only in sites with training in their action plans. However, although cross-training was not an action plan item for every site, it was a common choice. Table 2 shows that most child welfare (91%) and child support (88%) respondents reported progress in preparing cross-training curriculum since the conference. About three-quarters of the child welfare workers said trainings had been convened to introduce child welfare workers to the child support system. Similarly, three-quarters of the child support respondents said child support had receiving some training on the child welfare system.

**Table 2. Respondents Reported Progress on Training Plans Since the Conference**

	Child Welfare Respondents	Child Support Respondents
<b>Child support and child welfare have worked on preparing cross-trainings</b>		
No	9%	12%
Yes	91%	88%
<b>Trainings have been held for child support workers to explain child welfare</b>		
No	27%	25%
Yes	73%	75%
<b>Trainings have been held for child welfare workers to explain child support</b>		
No	9%	25%
Yes	91%	75%
	(11)	(17)

Table 3 shows the reported progress agencies made on efforts to improve cross-agency communication, another common initiative in site action plans. Approximately half of both the child welfare and child support respondents report that the two agencies have worked to develop Memoranda of Understanding to guide their joint efforts. Far more — approximately 90 percent in both agencies — report efforts to allow some information sharing across the agencies. Finally, about 70 percent of both child welfare and child support respondents report that their sites have worked on improving communications between the court handling child support matters and the court processing child abuse and neglect filings.

**Table 3. Respondents Reported Progress on Communication Since the Conference**

Child support and child welfare have...	Child Welfare Respondents	Child Support Respondents
<b>Developed a Memorandum of Understanding to guide joint efforts</b>		
No	55%	46%
Yes	45%	54%
<b>Worked on interagency information sharing</b>		
No	9%	12%
Yes	91%	88%
<b>Made efforts to improve communication between the courts handling child support and the courts handling child welfare</b>		
No	30%	31%
Yes	70%	69%
	(11)	(17)

Although most action plans did not address proposed changes in their action plans, just over 60 percent of the child welfare respondents, and nearly half of the child support respondents, said their agencies had explored new staffing arrangements since the conference. The new arrangements would include, but not be limited to, specialized foster care workers within child support, child support staff stationed at the court handling child abuse cases, or liaisons between the agencies. Needless to say, consideration of new arrangements does not guarantee their adoption.

**Table 4. Respondents Report of Progress on Staffing Since the Conference**

	Child Welfare Respondents	Child Support Respondents
<b>Explored new staffing arrangements</b>		
No	36%	53%
Yes	64%	47%
	(11)	(17)

Finally, Table 5 shows survey respondent reports of progress to involve child support in child welfare locate efforts. Since participating in the conference, slightly more than half (56%) of the child welfare respondents, and almost half (46%) of the child support respondents, reported that steps had been taken to allow the Federal Parent Locator Service to be used to locate parents for the child welfare agency. The figures were slightly higher (67% and 54%, respectively) with respect to use of the State Parent Locator Service. Over 60 percent of both child welfare and child support respondents reported that work had been done to allow the use of other child support locate tools.

**Table 5. Respondents Reported Progress on Location Initiatives Since the Conference**

	Child Welfare Respondents	Child Support Respondents
<b>Steps taken to allow the Federal Parent Locator Service to be used to locate parents for the child welfare agency</b>		
No	44%	54%
Yes	56%	46%
<b>Steps taken to allow State Parent Locator Service to be used to locate parents for child welfare</b>		
No	33%	46%
Yes	67%	54%
<b>Steps taken to allow other child support locate tools to be used in child welfare locate efforts</b>		
No	33%	39%
Yes	67%	61%
	(11)	(17)

## Reactions of Participants

As noted above, agency representatives who participated in both the July 2006 and July 2007 conferences were asked to complete an online survey about their experiences, including rating various aspects of the conferences.

Tables 6 and 7 show how participants responded to questions asking them whether the conference had provided them with new information about partner agencies. As Table 6 indicates, 88 percent of the child support respondents reported learning new information about how child welfare operates, and 83 percent of the child welfare workers said they learned something new about child support (see Table 7).

**Table 6. Respondents Report of Learning About Child Welfare at the Conference**

	Child Welfare Respondents	Child Support Respondents
I learned things I did not know about practices and policies at my state or local child welfare agency		
Strongly agree	27%	41%
Somewhat agree	27%	47%
Disagree strongly or somewhat	46%	12%
	(11)	(17)

While a primary purpose of the conference was to educate child support about child welfare and vice versa, the tables indicate that many respondents learned about their own agencies as well. Just over half (54%) of all child welfare respondents said they learned new information about the operations of the child welfare agency, while just under half (47%) of the child support respondents learned new information about the operations of the child support agency.

**Table 7. Respondents Report of Learning About Child Support at the Conference**

	Child Welfare Respondents	Child Support Respondents
I learned things I did not know about practices and policies at my state or local child support agency		
Strongly agree	27%	12%
Somewhat agree	46%	35%
Disagree strongly or somewhat	27%	53%
	(11)	(17)

The conferences appears to have been successful helping participants to see ways in which their agencies could improve the processing of joint cases and in sparking ideas for pilot projects to test out new ideas. Among child welfare workers, all of the respondents reported gaining insights into improving case processing, and 73 percent said they had gained ideas for pilot programs. All of the child support respondents credited the conferences with giving them ideas about improving case processing and pilot programs to test ways to improve practice (see Table 8).

**Table 8. Participants' Reports of Insights into  
Improving Child Support and Child Welfare Practices and Launching Pilot Programs  
Resulting From the Conference**

	Child Welfare Respondents	Child Support Respondents
The conference helped me to see how practices related to child support and child welfare cases might be improved		
Strongly agree	91%	77%
Somewhat agree	9%	23%
Disagree strongly or somewhat	0%	0%
The conference gave me ideas about ways to pilot new practices in child support and child welfare cases		
Strongly agree	73%	71%
Somewhat agree	0%	29%
Disagree strongly or somewhat	27%	0%
	(11)	(17)

As is shown in Table 9, virtually all the participants, regardless of their agency affiliation, credited the conferences with improving the automation and training needs of their agencies.

**Table 9. Participants' Reports of Insights into  
Automation Needs and Training Needs Resulting From the Conference**

	Child Welfare Respondents	Child Support Respondents
The conference helped me understand the types of automated enhancements that are most needed		
Strongly agree	64%	53%
Somewhat agree	27%	47%
Disagree strongly or somewhat	9%	0%
The conference helped me to identify areas where child support and child welfare workers need more training		
Strongly agree	82%	71%
Somewhat agree	18%	29%
Disagree strongly or somewhat	0%	0%
	(11)	(17)

Finally, Table 10 shows the percentage of child welfare and child support respondents who felt that future conferences with additional jurisdictions, continued follow-up calls with the 2006 and 2007 sites, and monitoring calls with a single site would help create further impetus for collaboration.

The results suggest that most respondents believe further conferences with additional jurisdictions would help to promote collaboration on a national level. Respondents were less convinced of the value of continued calls with other participating sites or of telephone monitoring with individual sites, although most felt these steps would be at least “somewhat” helpful.

**Table 10. Participants' Assessments of Possible Actions to Encourage Further Collaboration**

How helpful would the following be in encouraging child support and child welfare collaboration in your community and nationwide?	Child Welfare Respondents	Child Support Respondents
<b>More meetings bringing together additional jurisdictions</b>		
Very helpful	73%	35%
Somewhat helpful	18%	65%
Not very or not helpful	9%	0%
<b>Continued calls with sites that participated in the conference you attended</b>		
Very helpful	9%	24%
Somewhat helpful	64%	59%
Not very or not helpful	27%	18%
<b>Continued monitoring calls with just your site</b>		
Very helpful	0%	40%
Somewhat helpful	82%	27%
Not very or not helpful	18%	33%
	(11)	(17)

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## **Summary and Discussion**

The child support and child welfare project was undertaken to improve collaboration between sister agencies in multiple jurisdictions. The project sought to promote collaboration by bringing together top-level managers and other key representatives of child welfare and child support agencies in targeted jurisdictions to discuss shared concerns and engage in the development of plans to improve the handling of cases jointly held by both agencies. The jurisdictions that participated in the project were Camden County, New Jersey; Clackamas County, Oregon; Davidson County, Tennessee; Hampden and Worcester counties, Massachusetts; Hennepin County, Minnesota; Los Angeles County, California; Milwaukee County, Wisconsin; and Oklahoma County, Oklahoma. Representatives of these jurisdictions participated in one of two, two-day meetings that were held in Washington, D.C., in July 2006 and July 2007. The major topics they considered were ways of locating fathers for adoption and placement purposes, improving paternity establishment in foster care cases, referring appropriate cases to child support agencies for collection purposes and avoiding inappropriate referrals that might impede reunification goals, and communicating about changes in custodial arrangements so that child support is distributed appropriately. Representatives of both agencies also wanted administrators and line staff to better understand the key goals and pressures that their counterparts face and the role that they each play in processing shared cases.

The conferences led to the development of site-specific action plans that itemized the steps each agency hoped to take to achieve shared objectives dealing with communication and collaboration. These were developed and amended over time as the conference representatives returned to their agencies and began to work on implementation. The Center for Policy Research monitored the progress that participating jurisdictions made through a series of site-specific and cross-site conference calls.

A review of the action plans developed by participating jurisdictions reveals that all areas of concern received at least some attention. Six of the eight chose to focus on cross-agency training, two chose those focus on policies and practices that govern the referral of child welfare cases to the child support agency, four made communication between child support and child welfare a focal point of the action plan and developed liaisons and work groups to achieve this goal, and two designated specialized child support staff to handle foster care cases and improve coordination with child welfare agencies. In addition, several jurisdictions made commitments to explore the feasibility of expanding the ability of child welfare agencies to access location tools held by the child support agency and to improve the exchange of information through the automated systems for the two agencies.

Questionnaires completed by 28 conference attendees, or 70 percent of participants who still hold positions with child support or child welfare agencies, showed that the conferences were viewed extremely favorably, with nearly all participants reporting continued activity on the action plan following the conference and progress in each of the areas targeted for improvement. In addition, conference participants said that they learned a lot about the operations of their sister agency as well as their own, and that they gained insights on how to improve ways of processing joint cases and conduct pilot projects to test out new ideas. Virtually all participants in both types of agencies view future conferences with additional jurisdictions as a “very” or “somewhat” helpful way to create further impetus for collaboration.

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The Child Support and Child Welfare Project was clearly an effective way of promoting coordination. Participants in every jurisdiction credited the project with moving the needle on interagency collaboration. Although many had developed relationships with sister agencies and had expressed prior interest in furthering collaboration, these liaisons had occurred only at the highest levels of agency management and efforts to coordinate had typically stalled after some initial planning sessions. The project provided the framework and timelines that busy people need to set aside some time and energy for a discretionary, future-looking activity like interagency collaboration. The Washington, D.C., conferences allowed participants the physical separation from their regular duties and pressures to concentrate on collaboration issues. The conferences also afforded participants exposure to their counterparts in other geographical settings and to national experts, conditions that helped stimulate thinking about new ways of doing things and about importing and exploring promising practices. Finally, the process of developing an action plan ensured that each jurisdiction left the conference with a blueprint for future action, along with a specific set of intermediate steps, a tight timeline, and a division of labor.

While the project was an effective, external source of coordination, the experiences of the eight jurisdictions in implementing their action plan suggests that other factors come into play in making change. The following are some more general lessons on how to further interagency coordination and collaboration that perhaps apply to other settings and agency pairs.

**Effective Collaboration Requires a Push from the Top.** Collaboration efforts take extra time and energy. In the short-term, these efforts may appear to detract from the performance objectives of individual agencies. Making collaboration a priority requires a “push from the top.” The project involved the participation of top-level managers from both the child support and child welfare agencies. These leaders provided the impetus for the collaboration effort and the momentum to sustain it. In one jurisdiction, resolve at the top was fueled by a lawsuit brought by a long-separated father and daughter against the child welfare agency that illustrated the dangers of failing to collaborate. In other settings, managers realized that their performance objectives could not be met without collaborative efforts.

**Effective Collaboration Requires Tenacity.** Directives from the top do not immediately translate into reality without a lot of persistence and follow-through. One agency tends to assume a lead role, and the manager of that entity needs to “stay on top” of the effort. It requires “constant reinforcement.” As one administrator put it, “We sent reminder after reminder about meetings or things we had agreed to do. It involves a lot of cajoling and constant follow up.”

**Effective Collaboration Requires Realistic Expectations.** Collaboration is not everyone’s top priority. Successful efforts require that participants have perspective and realistic expectations about what partner agencies will do and their time frames for performance. Partner agencies have other important goals and deadlines. Managers say that it is important to acknowledge these diffuse and conflicting pressures and “cut other participants some slack.”

**Effective Collaboration Requires Focus on a Few Key Objectives.** The 2006 and 2007 conferences resulted in the generation of a long list of proposed interventions that were subsequently pared back to a manageable list. In most jurisdictions, collaboration between child support and the child welfare agency wound up involving the conduct of cross-agency training programs and the development and improvement of communication techniques, including interagency liaisons. Other more elaborate plans that involved new

staffing or technological innovations were dropped or postponed pending implementation of top-ranked interventions that could be accomplished more quickly.

**Effective Collaboration Requires Building and Maintaining Relationships.** Ultimately, cooperation across agencies requires building relationships with individuals in sister agencies. Managers emphasize the importance of connecting with their responsive counterparts in sister agencies, cultivating these ties, and reinforcing them over time. These individuals are then equipped to “sell” ideas to others in their agencies. While technology and geography definitely feature in promoting or hindering collaboration, the consensus is that positive collaborative efforts across agencies are still rooted in human relationships and that attention should be paid to their cultivation.

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## End Notes

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- <sup>ii</sup> Wang, Ching-Tung and Daro, Deborah. "Current Trends in Child Abuse Reporting and Fatalities: The Results of the 1997 Annual 50-State Survey," Working Paper 808. The Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research.
- <sup>iii</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, 1996 Green Book, Washington, D.C. 1996.
- <sup>iv</sup> Federal Child Welfare Program Today available at [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats\\_research/afcars/sec11gb/federal.htm](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars/sec11gb/federal.htm).
- <sup>v</sup> "Foster Care Statistics" at <http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/foster.pdf>.
- <sup>vi</sup> Sonenstein, F., Malm, K., and Billing, A. "Study of Fathers' Involvement in Permanency Planning and Child Welfare Casework." The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. 2002.
- <sup>vii</sup> Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect. Andrea J. Sedlak, Ph.D and Diane D. Broadhurst, M.L.A. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect. 1996.
- <sup>viii</sup> Sorenson, E., and C. Zibman. "To What Extent Do Children Benefit from Child Support?" The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. 2000.
- <sup>ix</sup> "What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate, and Involve Nonresident Fathers." The Urban Institute, Washington, D.C. April 2006.
- <sup>x</sup> Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare. University of Minnesota, Practice Notes, Issue 15, March 2004. Fatherhood Factor in Permanency Planning. Assessment of Child Welfare Practices Regarding Fathers. National Family Preservation Network, Annie E. Casey Foundation. March 2001.
- <sup>xi</sup> National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice. "Father Involvement in Child Welfare: Estrangement and Reconciliation." Best Practice/Next Practice. Summer 2002.
- <sup>xii</sup> Mallon, Gerald P. "Engaging Fathers in Permanency Planning: Early Identification of Paternal Resources." *Permanency Planning Today*. Winter 2003.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Banks, Sandy. "Long-Separated Father, Daughter Sue L.A. County Foster Care Agency. Los Angeles Times." July 17, 2006.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Personal communication. Gail Guilianno.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Ibid*.